DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 383 658 SP 035 998

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TITLE	Observations and Opinions of Student Teachers while in the Field.
PUB DATE	Nov 94
NOTE	18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association (Nashville, TN, November 9-11, 1994).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Elementary School Teachers; Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education; Manipulative Materials; Mathematics Materials; Multicultural Education; Preservice Teacher Education; Secondary School Teachers; Social Studies; Special Needs Students; *Student Teacher Attitudes; *Student Teachers; Student Teaching; Teacher Education Programs; *Teaching Methods; Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS	Alternative Assessment; Hands On Experience

ABSTRACT

This study surveyed teacher education students during their student teaching assignments in order to determine their perspectives on their preparedness for the classroom and their observations or use of effective teaching strategies during their student teaching experiences. Responses were obtained from 31 preservice teachers, 26 elementary and 6 secondary. The student teachers responded to questions that assessed their knowledge of: content areas, instructional and evaluative practices, school climate, learning disabilities, and at risk behaviors. In addition, the student teachers expressed opinions regarding their perceptions of the conditions of teaching. A comparison of the mean levels of the two groups of student teachers (elementary and secondary) was made. Significant differences between the groups were found in: adequate time for teaching academic content (secondary preservice teachers thought they had more time); infusion of multicultural appreciation (elementary preservice teachers did more of this); use of mathematics manipulatives (those in elementary education did more of this); and integrative social studies units (elementary preservice teachers experienced integration of curricula twice as often as those at the secondary level). Responses from the sample, as a whole, identified areas that need to be modified or addressed in their teacher education program. (Contains 20 references.) (Author/JB)

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ED 383 658

Running head: OBSERVATIONS AND OPINIONS OF STUDENT TEACHERS

Observations and Opinions of Student Teachers While in the Field

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the

Mid-South Educational Research Association

Nashville, Tennessee

November 9 - 11, 1994

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to survey teacher education students during their student teaching assignments in order to determine a) their perspective of their preparedness for the classroom; b) their observations or use of effective teaching strategies during their student teaching experiences. Responses were obtained from 31 preservice teachers, 26 elementary and 6 secondary. Students responded to questions that assessed their knowledge of: Content Areas, Instructional and Evaluative Practices, School Climate, Learning Disabilities, and At Risk Behaviors. In addition, the student teachers expressed opinions regarding their perceptions of the conditions of teaching.

A comparison of the mean levels of the two groups of student teachers (elementary and secondary) was made through the use of *t* tests. There was a significant difference between the elementary and secondary preservice teachers in the areas of:

- Adequate Time for Teaching Academic Content ($p < .018$)
- Infusion of Multicultural Appreciation ($p < .031$)
- Use of Mathematics Manipulatives ($p < .041$)
- Integrative Social Studies Units ($p < .007$)

In addition to the significant findings, responses from the sample, as a whole, identified areas that need to be modified or addressed in our teacher education program.

Observations and Opinions of Student Teachers While in the Field

Introduction

Student teachers at the University of Southern Mississippi are leaving the teacher education program today better prepared to meet the individual needs of their students. After acquiring a sound theoretical background, which includes learning state-of-the-art instructional strategies, and after spending many hours in field-based situations, these prospective teachers eagerly enter their internships (Singleton, Masztal, & Flores, 1993).

Wanting to ascertain the attitude of student teachers with regard to their perceived preparedness for the classroom and their use of effective teaching strategies during their student teaching experiences, a survey was developed and first presented to 31 preservice teachers who attend the University of Southern Mississippi on its Gulf Coast campuses. Curious as to their attitudes toward the public school environment during their student teaching assignments, responses were obtained from 26 elementary and 6 secondary preservice teachers. The items on the survey were designed to address the following constructs:

1. Support services
2. Respect for teachers and students

3. Class size
4. Teacher empowerment
5. Learning time
6. Instructional strategies/alternative forms of assessment
7. School climate - positive and negative aspects
8. Preparedness for student teaching

Most of the responses to the items on the survey were obtained through the use of a Likert scale which provided a range of responses from 1 (Extremely Negative) to 5 (Extremely Positive). The other responses were secured through short answers.

Hypotheses:

It was hypothesized that the student teachers in this pilot study would have positive attitudes regarding all areas surveyed with the exception of their observations of the use of consistent, effective instructional strategies and alternative forms of assessment, which the researchers believed would be limited. It was further hypothesized that there would be no significant differences between the two groups (elementary versus secondary).

Results

A comparison of the mean levels of the two groups of student teachers (elementary versus secondary), through the use of *t* tests, revealed that there was a significance difference between the elementary and secondary preservice teachers' attitudes, or observations, in regard to:

- Adequate Time for Teaching Academic Content which was ($p < .018$) with the Secondary preservice teachers believing that they had more time
- Infusion of Multicultural Appreciation Throughout the Curricula ($p < .031$) with the Elementary preservice teachers observing and experiencing more of this during their assignments
- Use of Mathematics Manipulatives ($p < .041$) with the Elementary preservice teachers using manipulatives to a greater extent than the Secondary preservice teachers
- Integrative Social Studies Units ($p < .007$) with the Elementary preservice teachers experiencing the integration of curricula twice as often as the preservice teachers at the Secondary level

Although the two groups were not similar in size, so that it is difficult to generalize these findings to other populations, the results do indicate a difference in the philosophy underlying the two educational levels.

When looking at the groups as a whole, some other trends were also noted which need further investigation. They include the following which indicates the small percentage of preservice teachers who believe that they are completely prepared to:

- Meet the needs of individuals with physical handicaps (19%)
- Meet the needs of individuals with at-risk behaviors (26%)
- Meet the needs of individuals with learning disabilities (26%)

When asked the greatest extent to which they either observed or incorporated the use of mathematics manipulatives or writing across the curriculum, or the degree to which they implemented integrative social studies lessons or units, the student teachers responded in the following manner:

- Use of Mathematics Manipulatives: Daily 32%
- Writing Across the Curriculum: Daily 35%
- Integrative Social Studies Lessons: Daily 16%

The frequency of hands-on learning experiences and the use of portfolios for assessment purposes occurred as follows:

- Hands-On Learning Experiences: Daily 32%; Often 42%
- Use of Portfolio Assessment: Daily 10%; Often 23%

The occurrence of other types of authentic or performance-based assessment and the degree to which multicultural awareness and appreciation was infused throughout the curriculum was also explored:

- Authentic Assessment: Daily 23%; Often 45%
- Multicultural Awareness: Daily 7%; Often 23%

When asked to reveal the most positive aspects of their student teaching experiences, the preservice teachers responded as follows:

- Working with the Students: 80%
- Academic Success of the Students: 40%
- Imparting Knowledge in the Content Areas: 40%

Finally, when asked to reveal the most negative aspect of their student teaching experiences, the student teachers indicated the following:

- Stress: 33%
- Discipline: 33%

Discussion

Students with special needs. With the philosophy of inclusion mandating changes in our public schools with regard to instructional strategies and alternative methods of assessing learning, the level of confidence that our preservice teachers revealed in this area suggests that the ramifications of meeting the needs of individuals with disabilities in the regular classroom need to be further addressed both at the university and public school levels. O'Shea (1994) acknowledges that increased collaboration must take place between regular education and special education teachers and other support personnel if students with special needs are to be successfully included in the mainstream. Houck and Rogers (1994) concur that many of the regular education teachers still lack the necessary skills for making the adaptations necessary for the Regular Education Initiative (REI), or inclusive programming, to be effectively implemented. Consequently, it is not surprising that our student teachers do not feel confident in this area.

Mathematics. Although the National Council of the Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) advocates the use of manipulatives for teaching, and learning about, new mathematical concepts, these researchers were concerned that two-thirds of the student teachers in this study did not observe the use of manipulatives

or use manipulatives in mathematics lessons on a regular basis (Van de Walle, 1994).

Writing. Writing across the curriculum was only observed or occurred on a limited basis, and this constitutes another area of concern for us as teacher educators. These results are of particular interest since our preservice teachers are introduced to the whole language philosophy in their reading and language arts courses. In addition, in the mathematics methodology course, the preservice teachers are taught the importance of having students demonstrate, through both verbal and written communication, their understanding of mathematical concepts (Stix, 1994; Van de Walle, 1994; Weaver, 1990; Whitin & Gary, 1994).

Social Studies. The fact that the integration of curricula occurred so infrequently, even in the area of social studies, was also surprising to these researchers (Jacobs, 1989; Maxim, 1991). The importance of interdisciplinary teaching is espoused in all methodology courses in USM's teacher education program since research in the field of neuropsychology suggests that "the brain searches for common patterns and connections ..." when one is learning new skills and concepts. Research further supports the contention that "every experience actually contains within it

the seeds of many, and possibly all, disciplines" (Caine & Caine, 1991, p. 119).

"Hands - on" learning. The student teachers either observed or facilitated hands-on learning experiences from 30 to 40 percent of the time. Although these researchers would have liked for the student teachers to have provided their students with more opportunities for active participation in the learning process, we believe that these findings indicate one of the more positive aspects of the field experiences, especially if the understanding of concepts is of primary importance (Cruikshank & Sheffield, 1992; Harmin, 1994; Maxim, 1991).

Alternative forms of assessment. The low occurrence of the use of portfolios in the classrooms was, once again, somewhat surprising to these teacher educators. In most of the student teachers' methodology courses, portfolio assessment is not only advocated, but this type of assessment constitutes a portion of the preservice teachers' final grades. Whether the infrequency of the use of portfolios is due to a lack of modeling, on the part of the cooperating teachers, or can be attributed to the student teachers' percieved lack of empowerment, this area needs further investigation. Head (1992) believes that when student teachers are removed from their

familiar surroundings (e.g., university setting), and placed in off-campus situations, they are often more open to the influence of the cooperating teachers (p. 101).

Although the wide use of portfolios, by the cooperating teachers, was not evident, alternative forms of assessment were used or observed. Performance-based assessment is both advocated and implemented throughout USM's teacher education program (Cross & Hynes, 1994; Lambdin & Walker, 1994; Marzano, Pickering, & McTighe, 1993; Perrone, 1991).

Multicultural education. The small percent of time spent in the cultivation of multicultural awareness and appreciation either observed or experienced by the student teachers indicates another area that we must address if we are going to send into the classrooms teachers who are trained to meet the needs of students from cultures other than their own (Branch, Goodwin, & Gualtieri, 1993). In response to this need, the University of Southern Mississippi, on the Gulf Coast campuses, has recently established a graduate level course on Multiculturalism. In addition, in the Social Studies Methodology course designed for preservice teachers, a multicultural component, promoting the understanding and appreciation of diversity, has been added. During this course, the students learn about other cultures and

respond to these experiences through discussions in literary groups and in large group situations and through reflective journals and a short formal paper. Despite the steps we are taking to enable our future teachers to provide their culturally diverse students with successful learning experiences, we still have a long way to go when it comes to stimulating a true appreciation of diverse cultural perspectives (Hood & Parker, 1994).

Most positive and negative aspect. Although the student teachers thoroughly enjoyed working with students during their field experiences, they did not completely assume responsibility for their students' academic success. With the exception of working with the students, one third of the student teachers expressed that their experiences were stressful, and one third viewed the lack of discipline as a negative aspect of their assignments. Although the student teachers attend a seminar on positive classroom management, it appears that, for some, more preparation is needed in this area (Jones, 1987).

Conclusion

The findings of this pilot study are presently being compared to the results derived from two subsequent groups of student teachers. The researchers plan to use the combined findings to address the areas of perceived weakness in their

current teacher education program and to assist them in refining their survey instrument.

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